

## V for Vendetta and Political Philosophy: A Critique of Thomas Hobbes

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### Abstract / Introduction

In this paper, I illustrate the reciprocal relationship between popular culture and professional philosophy by connecting the recent dystopian film *V for Vendetta* and the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes. I show how Hobbes's political philosophy and his concept of human nature enriches our understanding of events and characters in *V for Vendetta*. I also show how *V for Vendetta* provides valuable insights into the various ways that Hobbes is mistaken. I conclude that a meaningful and rewarding relationship exists between popular culture and philosophical analysis.

### Utopia, Dystopia, and the Fatal Flaw

From Plato's *Republic* to Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the twin devices of the ideal good and the ideal bad have shaped the way that we engage our world and the world of ideas, including important philosophical concepts and theories. A common theme that emerges from utopian and dystopian visions is that of the fatal flaw, some failure that unravels the whole idealistic vision and lays bare an insight into something more profound. It is not particularly interesting that idealistic visions fail. What is interesting is just how such failures come about, and what they teach us about events, people, and ideas.

Within such failed ideal visions, there may be a struggle, a tension, a corruption, a temptation, a mission, a challenge, a goal, a tragedy, a blessing, a curse, an opportunity, etc. Many of these themes are present in our daily lives, and this is what makes utopian and

dystopian themes so intriguing – they depict worlds similar to ours. It is noteworthy that failures can occur with respect to events (plot) and people (characters), but also with respect to philosophical ideas and concepts. Philosophically, these narrative devices can encourage careful reflection, self-examination, and social critique. This claim runs contrary to those scholars who maintain that there is an antagonistic relationship between popular culture and genuine intellectual and philosophical discourse.<sup>1</sup> While I do not attempt to directly refute the position held by such scholars, I intend to problematize their position by showing that a positive, reciprocal relationship between popular culture and philosophical discourse can and does exist.

In particular, failures within idealistic narratives invite us to examine assumptions about ourselves and our own identities, assumptions about human nature and about human motivation, and assumptions about human society, human politics, and human culture. In this paper I examine the recent dystopian film *V for Vendetta* from the point of view of the political philosopher Thomas Hobbes. His social contract theory includes numerous assumptions about human nature, psychological motivation, and political theory that provide an illuminating perspective when applied to *V for Vendetta*. I investigate Hobbes's view regarding fear as a central source of psychological motivation, as well as Hobbes's views regarding the illegitimacy of political rebellion. I also explore the ways that *V for Vendetta* provides the basis for challenging several of Hobbes's key assumptions. In other words, *V for Vendetta* helps us to see Hobbes's philosophical shortcomings. As such, we can appreciate that Hobbes's assumption about our deepest fears leads to an incomplete picture of human nature and psychological motivation. These failures also provide the basis for challenging Hobbes's views regarding political rebellion. What emerges from this examination is an appreciation of the role of fear within the context of personal empowerment and political revolution. The relationship between

Hobbes and *V for Vendetta* also shows that a positive, rewarding reciprocal relationship exists between popular culture and philosophical analysis.<sup>2</sup>

### The Political Philosophy of Hobbes

The philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) sought to discover universal principles to serve as the basis for organizing a civil society that would be immune from destruction from within.<sup>3</sup> Hobbes lived through terrible times of war, culminating in the English Civil War, and sought to provide the theoretical groundwork to avoid future calamities.

Hobbes was a materialist, which means that he did not help himself to various appeals to the supernatural (i.e., Divine Providence or Divine Right), nor did he help himself to abstract, eternal principles (i.e., Plato's Forms). Instead, Hobbes sought to ground his political theory in the natural world, the world of real human beings with real limitations and vulnerabilities. Central to his political theory is a conception of human nature based on these material conditions of human existence.

As he begins laying out his political framework and his account of human nature, Hobbes observes that humans are roughly equal. He intends this assertion of equality in two ways. First, the assertion of equality is meant as a symbolic political assertion contradicting claims to innate nobility or an essentially superior class of humans fit to be rulers. Second, the assertion of equality is meant to be a brute empirical fact that no single human being is so strong or so smart that he or she can resist attack by a small group of dumber, weaker individuals. We are all equal in the sense that we are vulnerable to physical attack. Moreover, being natural creatures, we have the propensity and need for sleep, which renders us vulnerable: we all must sleep sometime!

Next, Hobbes invites us to consider what life would be like in what he famously called “the state of nature.” In a state of nature there is no political organization, no central authority to enforce any rules. Humans are merely organisms struggling to exist, and our desires drive us to destroy each other as we compete for scarce goods. Hobbes writes:

From this equality of ability ariseth equality of hope in the attaining of our ends. And therefore if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and in the way to their end (which is principally their own conservation, and sometimes their delectation only) endeavor to destroy or subdue one another. (*Leviathan*, p. 94)

This propensity to destroy or subdue each other is akin to a total state of war, with every human fighting against every other human. This is the core of Hobbes’s “state of nature” which is a direct outcome of his notion of human nature. He writes:

Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of war, where every man is enemy to every man; the same is consequent to the time, wherein men live without other security, than what their own strength and their own invention shall furnish them withal. In such condition, there is no place for industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain; and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. (*Leviathan*, pp. 95-96)

At the very end of this passage, we see Hobbes’s famous assertion that humans are nasty, brutish, and short. More than this, however, Hobbes is also keen to spell out that in the state of nature we cannot forge meaningful, long-term alliances. Consequently, there will be no public works projects, no cultural achievement, no higher learning, etc. In short, humans will be unable to achieve anything that requires meaningful collaboration. In a state of nature, we are doomed to remain utterly uncivilized and forever fearful of personal attack.

For Hobbes, in the state of nature there are no natural property rights, there is no right to vote, there is no right to free speech, etc. Our only natural right is to defend ourselves by any means we can. Hobbes writes:

To this war of every man against every man, this also is consequent; that nothing can be unjust. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice have there no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law; where there is no law, no injustice. Force, and fraud are in war the two cardinal virtues. Justice and injustice are none of the faculties neither of the body, nor mind. If they were, they might be in a man that were alone in the world, as well as his senses and passions. They are qualities that relate to men in society, not in solitude. It is consequent also to the same condition that there be no property, no dominion, no *mine* and *thine* distinct; but only that to be every man's that he can get, and for so long as he can keep it. And thus much for the ill condition which man by mere nature is actually placed in; though with a possibility to come out of it, consisting partly in the passions partly in his reason. (*Leviathan*, p. 97)

Thus, the only natural right is one of self-defense, to protect and defend our lives by whatever means we can. Given that human nature is greedy and self-centered, in a state of nature we will be prompted to compete for scarce resources and to defend our own lives from the threat of physical attack. Hobbes further explains what this central natural right is in the state of nature:

The right of nature... is the liberty each man hath to use his own power as he will himself, for the preservation of his own nature; that is to say, of his own life; and consequently, of doing anything, which in his own judgment and reason, he shall conceive to be the aptest means thereunto. (*Leviathan*, p. 98)

According to Hobbes, it is our desire for self-preservation that prompts us to compete for resources and to defend our lives. It is reason, however, that guides us to seek peace. Hobbes articulates two laws of nature that spring from this single natural right, which boil down to the twin guides of competition and cooperation. Hobbes writes:

And consequently it is a precept, or general rule of reason *that every man ought to endeavor peace, as far as he has hope of obtaining it; and when he cannot obtain it, that he may seek and use all helps and advantages of war.* The first branch of which rule, containeth the first, and fundamental law of nature; which is, *to seek peace and follow it.*

The second, the sum of the right of nature; which is, *by all means we can to defend ourselves.* (*Leviathan*, p.99)

From this fundamental law of nature, by which men are commanded to endeavor peace, is derived this second law: *that a man be willing, when others are so too, as far forth as for peace and defense of himself he shall think it necessary, to lay down this right to all things; and be contented with so much liberty against other men as he would allow other men against himself.* For as long as every man holdeth this right of doing anything he liketh, so long are all men in the condition of war. But if other men will not lay down their right, as well as he, then there is no reason for anyone to divest himself of his, for that were to expose himself to prey, which no man is bound to, rather than to dispose himself to peace. (*Leviathan*, p. 99)

From these few selections, we see that Hobbes presents us with a basic framework according to which all humans are equal, we are all motivated by self-interest, and we overcome our basic impulse to defend ourselves through violence by following the recommendations of reason to enter cooperative alliances.

Given that we will seek peace, at first we seek to form alliances between individuals: reason recommends that we enter into an agreement with each other to refrain from killing each other. However, under such conditions no one sleeps very soundly because our agreement is a highly unstable: the moment it benefits one of us to break our agreement, we will most certainly break it. If I can eliminate my competition without repercussion (i.e., without threat of retaliation or loss of social status), then I will. The same is true for everyone, however, and this returns us once again to the state of nature, the state of all-out war. This should come as no surprise, given Hobbes's assumption about human nature.

Hobbes concludes that in order to preserve a meaningful and lasting stability of cooperative living, we must enter into a *social contract* in which we transfer our only natural right to a mutually agreed-upon Sovereign, or what Hobbes refers to as The State.<sup>4</sup> In exchange for transferring our natural right, we entrust The State to enforce the agreement of peace between individuals (or "subjects" as Hobbes calls them). Now, instead of fearing our fellow human

beings, we all fear The State, limiting our own behavior so as not to be the recipient of state punishment. This is Hobbes's famous social contract theory.

It is only within The State that there are such concepts as justice, property, and rights. Power justifies such concepts, and to the extent that The State has the power to enforce property rights, for example, then there *are* such things as property rights. If The State cannot enforce property rights, then there are no property rights (and we return to the state of nature with respect to property). For all such civil rights, The State's political power is the basis of such rights. In this way, The State is justified in exercising its power and control because all subjects benefit from The State remaining powerful enough to enforce civil law. As long as subjects remain fearful of each other *and* of The State, society can remain stable and flourish. Without a powerful State, individuals are likely to destroy cooperative alliances, returning to the state of nature.

And so, these are the basic insights and assumptions that Hobbes is working with: that humans are equal, and equally vulnerable, and that we share a common fear of physical attack and death. This fear becomes the central theme for Hobbes's account of human psychological motivation and his political theory. Fear is what makes the state of nature so miserable. But it is fear that controls and protects individuals when living under the power of The State. I now turn to the film *V for Vendetta* to illustrate how Hobbes's notion of fear can provide a greater depth to our understanding of both plot and character.

### *V for Vendetta*: Overview and Political Revolution

The recent film *V for Vendetta* joins a long tradition of dystopian narratives within popular culture. The film is based on the graphic novel written by Alan Moore and illustrated by David Lloyd (Moore and Lloyd 2002).<sup>5</sup> *V for Vendetta* represents a dystopian society set in near-

future London where a single political party, the Norsefire Party, has established itself as an unchallenged political force. After being elected democratically, the Norsefire regime capitalized on several national tragedies (events that were orchestrated by members of the Norsefire Party) and elevated its newly-elected president to the role of High Chancellor (a powerful dictator position, isolated from checks and balances). In this dystopian future society, England exists in a world that has experienced virus outbreaks, plagues, crop failures, as well as numerous world-wide wars, including a civil war taking place in the former United States of America.

This new Norsefire government has implemented numerous changes throughout most of England, including a new state motto: Strength through unity, unity through faith. Elevating vacuous patriotism and religious fundamentalism to new levels, the new government controls citizens through fear, intimidation, and conformity. The Norsefire regime has eroded civil liberties, imposed color-coded curfews, and eliminated cultural and religious diversity. There is no safe way to question the rule of the Norsefire regime. Political critics are detained, questioned, and secretly murdered under a new set of sedition laws. In the face of increased terror and fear (again, largely created by Norsefire party members), the government promises to protect citizens in exchange for their obedience.

The Norsefire regime asserts considerable control over many aspects of the lives of its citizens, and does so through the use of five key branches of the government. The Eye and The Ear are two branches of government responsible for spying on citizens. The Mouth is the Norsefire propaganda machine operating under the British Television Network (BTN). The Finger and The Fingermen represent the aspect of the government responsible for arresting, torturing, and disposing of problematic individuals. They are the “hands on” aspect of the law, responsible for roughing up and intimidating citizens. Finally, The Nose is the branch of

government in charge of investigating “enemies of the state” and carrying out other detective work.

Consequently, citizens are fearful of the government, but the Norsefire regime is fearful of internal corruption and loss of control over society. The basic organizational “agenda” of the Norsefire party is to assert itself as having more and more control over society, while simultaneously appearing to be interested in protecting the stability of society and the safety of its citizens. Thus, the Norsefire regime seeks to maintain control through fear, propaganda, and intimidation. The five branches of government assist in achieving this social control, and it is against this totalitarian backdrop that our anarchist hero, known simply as V, emerges.

The opening scenes of the film depict the failed gunpowder plot of 5<sup>th</sup> of November 1605, as well as the capture and execution of Guy Fawkes. Accompanying these scenes is the general admonition (voice-over narration) that speaks to one of the running themes of the film: People should not be afraid of their government. Governments should be afraid of its people.

Throughout the film, V’s face is covered with a white Guy Fawkes mask and he wears black flowing robes. Armed with various types of throwing knives and short swords, V plays the role of revolutionary protagonist. Over the course of a year, we follow V’s activities as he seeks revenge for past wrong-doings (strategically killing numerous Norsefire party members), and as he plans and orchestrates a massive political revolution.

After saving Evey Hammond from a back-alley assault by corrupt Fingermen, V brings her to a rooftop to witness his “opening number,” his initial act of rebellion: blowing up the Old Bailey justice building. The film then turns to events that bring Evey and V together more meaningfully. As the Norsefire government attempts to provide “spin control” for the previous night’s embarrassing events (claiming that the Old Bailey building was unsafe and that a

“controlled demolition” had been planned for weeks in advance), V takes over the BTN and broadcasts his own revolutionary message directly to the citizens. V confesses that, under the Norsefire Party, he senses that something is deeply wrong with England, and he suspects that other citizens feel the same way. Destroying the Old Bailey, V tells the citizens of London, was symbolic of speaking out against all of the injustices that the current Norsefire government has committed. V believes that there can be no justice and no genuine political freedom with the Norsefire regime in place. V says:

Fear got the best of you. And in your panic you turned to the now High Chancellor Adam Sutler. He promised you order and he promised you peace. And all he demanded in return was your silent obedient consent. Last night I started to end that silence. Last night I destroyed the Old Bailey to remind this country what it has forgotten.

V thinks that people have forgotten that citizens should not be living in fear of their government. That very idea seems to be present among citizens, but it has been suppressed through fear and intimidation. Citizens are afraid to express their dissatisfaction with the Norsefire regime. In an oppressive, totalitarian state, it is a luxury to be able to criticize the government. It is this “luxury” that V seeks to return to the people of England through political revolution.

After a few additional rhetorical flourishes, V invites everyone in London to meet up with him in one year’s time to witness the destruction of the Houses of Parliament. He pledges to finish what Guy Fawkes started, reminding citizens that ideas are powerful and cannot be destroyed easily. In short, V promises to carry out a comprehensive political revolution, re-asserting the ideas of political freedom, civil rights, and free speech. What would Hobbes think of V’s revolutionary ambitions?

Clearly, the Norsefire regime is corrupt, using fear to control citizens. The Norsefire regime attempts to maintain its power through propaganda and the appearance of legitimate

concern for stability and safety. That citizens fear the government, and that the government abuses its power in this way is anticipated by Hobbes. Eventually, governments will grow power-hungry and corrupt and they will become all-consuming Leviathans (hence the title of Hobbes's political treatise). However, Hobbes does not condemn such governments. Rather, they are to be expected and encouraged. And this leads to Hobbes's infamous claim that even a corrupt government is better than no government at all. Clearly, this has a dampening effect on revolutionary aspirations.

To appreciate this dampening effect, consider what else Hobbes says about rebellion, revolution, and obedience. For example, Hobbes says that subjects should not be in love with any other form of government than their own and that subjects should not desire political change (*Leviathan*, Chapter 30, paragraph 7). To avoid such temptations, he recommends that subjects remain within the political boundaries of their commonwealth.

In addition to this, Hobbes states that subjects should be taught to love the commonwealth (and his fellow subjects) as a subject loves himself (*Leviathan*, Chapter 30, paragraph 8). Hobbes also says that subjects should not dispute the sovereign's power:

[H]ow great a fault it is to speak evil of the sovereign representative... or to argue and dispute his power in any way to use his name irreverently, whereby he may be brought into contempt with his people and [with] their obedience... slackened. (*Leviathan*, Chapter 30, paragraph 9)

Finally, Hobbes states that each subject should participate in holidays in order to assemble together and to "hear their duties told to them," and to be taught to be obedient to the sovereign (*Leviathan*, Chapter 30, paragraph 10). Building on this, Hobbes asserts that subjects should be taught to conduct themselves sincerely from the heart (*Leviathan*, Chapter 30,

paragraph 13). So, not only should all subjects be obedient to and love the Sovereign, they should do so heartfelt sincerity.

To our modern, democratic point of view, it is objectionable to assert that people should never question their political leaders, nor rebel or revolt against their government. But for Hobbes, this was a conclusion reached thoughtfully. His reasoning is something like the following. Whenever we consider massive political revolutions, we should be concerned with avoiding a return to the state of nature. If a political revolution results in the state of nature with no functional government at all, then we have destroyed any hope of improving our lives. For Hobbes, a fundamental premise is that the state of nature is the worst possible scenario imaginable. Thus, it follows that even a corrupt government is better than the state of nature.

A corrupt government is also better than a government lacking the power to enforce civil law (including property rights, etc.). Thus, if a political revolution leads to the establishment of a weak government, then Hobbes would prefer the powerful government. In short, political revolutions in response to corrupt governments are never justified, though political revolutions in response to weak governments may be justified, so long as a powerful government take its place. Simply put, in most cases, the risk of returning to the state of nature is too great.

Whether or not we agree with Hobbes's view, if revolutionary activities are pursued, then individuals will risk their own lives (or at least their general well-being). However, if individuals are motivated by a fear of their own death, and if the government is able to exercise control in this respect, then most revolutionary ambitions will be squelched. Under such conditions, it is unlikely to find many individuals willing to revolt. Hobbes would certainly approve of such a strategy on the part of The State to enforce stability and order: revolutions are messy affairs, during which significant harm is inflicted across all aspects of society. Add to this the risk of

descending back into a state of nature, and we can come to appreciate Hobbes's reasoning. Given his assumptions about human nature, the motivation provided by fear, and the importance of a strong government able to enforce civil law, Hobbes concludes that political rebellion and political revolution are illegitimate courses of action.

However, if political revolution is thought to be justified, then the recipe for success seems to be transcending fear of death that a corrupt government holds over its subjects. This is precisely where the main characters, V and Evey, come into play. Each transcends the fear of death, and this is what makes them such dangerous revolutionary figures. These characters also lay the foundation for a critique of Hobbes, especially his assumption that humans are primarily motivated by a fear and that the state of nature is worst possible scenario.

### Analysis of V

The character V is not vulnerable to control through fear of death. This situation comes about for two main reasons: first, V's unique physiology protects him from ordinary attack; and second, V's identity is defined by political ideals.

V was an unwilling subject who managed to survive experimental manipulation at the Larkhill facility, a facility run by founding members of the Norsefire party. As a result, V has enhanced coordination, a keen knowledge of martial arts, and is impervious to most forms of attack. In this way, V is not vulnerable to physical harm. He is unafraid, and consequently, he escapes the control of the government.

What's more, V's identity is immune to fear because his character has less to do with his physical well-being, and more to do with the political ideas that he promotes. This is illustrated nicely when V tells Evey that while *he* may be harmed, the *ideas* he represents and promotes

cannot. For example, when Evey says that she would like to know more about V, including what he really looks like beneath his mask, V responds, “There is a face beneath this mask, but it’s not me. I am no more that face than I am the muscles beneath it, or the bones beneath them.”

V means to be asserting that his identity is not the embodiment of flesh and bones, but the embodiment of ideas. Evey demonstrates her understanding at the end of the film when she is asked about V’s true identity. She replies, “He was Edmund Dantes. And he was my father. And my mother. My brother. My friend. He was you. And me. He was all of us.” In this way, V is a character based on political ideas, not personality.

Throughout his year of revolutionary activities, V kills with relative impunity. V is avenging the wrongs committed by members of the Norsefire regime, especially those responsible for the inhumane research conducted at the Larkhill facility. At the same time, he is laying the groundwork for a political revolution: he leads Inspector Finch to discover the truth about the Norsefire regime, he communicates with the general public, encourages them to resist the government, and gives them the tools for political change.

In the film, V is a proponent of democracy. In the graphic novel, V is a proponent of anarchy. For Hobbes, this difference is negligible, as he will be equally critical of any form of government unable to maintain stability and control. In Hobbes’s eyes, anarchy is no different than the state of nature, thus it is unacceptable. And democracy is unacceptable because it is vulnerable to weakness, internal dissolution, and civil war.<sup>6</sup> For Hobbes, it is better to maintain stability and thwart revolutions before they even start. In short, Hobbes is an advocate of whatever form of government able to enforce civil law and social stability. We could safely say that Hobbes would prefer a kind of powerful yet benevolent monarchy or oligarchy. In fact,

Hobbes would approve of the government found in Huxley's *Brave New World*, where a committee of ten benevolent World Controllers maintains political order and social stability.

### Analysis of Evey

At first, Evey is personally vulnerable quite afraid. She is even more afraid after accompanying V to the rooftop to witness the destruction of the Old Bailey building. She is fully aware how dangerous it is to overtly question the Norsefire government, and she realizes that simply witnessing the demolition of the Old Bailey places her in great danger. Her fear escalates when V arrives at the BTN (where Evey works) and begins broadcasting his revolutionary message.

In V's escape from the BTN, however, Evey plays a crucial (albeit accidental) role in saving V from capture (V is unaware that Evey works at the BTN). During V's escape, Evey is knocked unconscious and V takes her back to his residence, known as the Shadow Gallery. Evey is once again very afraid when V informs her that she is not free to leave for months (not only is Evey under investigation, V cannot risk allowing Evey to return to society, as she might reveal his whereabouts). This lack of freedom and the difficulties of being a "person of interest" terrifies Evey greatly, reminding her of her own politically-active parents, and how they were victims of the Norsefire regime. Fear of the Norsefire regime has motivated Evey to avoid anything that might cause her to be noticed. Her association with V has unraveled all of her based efforts to avoid trouble.

When Evey is given the chance to help V carry out another strategic revenge killing of a Norsefire party member (this time it is the pedophile, Bishop Lilliman), Evey plans to escape the Shadow Gallery. In the course of helping V, Evey runs away to Gordon's house (a friend and co-

worker who is the host of a day-time variety show on the BTN). At Gordon's house she feels safe, especially after Gordon reveals his homosexuality and his secret possessions (banned artwork and "illegal" religious books, such as the Koran). However, Evey's feeling of safety is brief. After Gordon re-writes his television show and makes fun of the High Chancellor (without approval from the government censors), Evey is once again fearful of political retaliation. Later that evening, when Gordon is hooded and taken away by the Fingermen (in a scene reminiscent of the arrest of Evey's own mother years earlier), Evey attempts to escape Gordon's house, but is captured and taken to a torture facility.

While being tortured, Evey's fear is great, but she does not allow herself to give up any information about V, his identity, or the location of the Shadow Gallery. While being tortured and questioned, Evey reads the story of a woman named Valerie. Valerie's story is one of fear and violence and torture, but ultimately results in a sense of peace and love. In Valerie's story, Evey witnesses and admires a kind of self-confidence that cannot be taken away. In conjunction with her physical torture, Valerie's story helps to shape Evey into a person without fear. The torture and questioning of Evey comes to an end when she is again asked to provide details about V. She is threatened with execution, and still refuses to provide any information. When Evey hears that she is to be taken out behind the chemical sheds and shot, she does not resist. Her face is calm. She is courageous, just like Valerie.

In response to Evey's tranquility in the face of certain death, the unseen interrogator says, "Then you have no fear anymore... you are completely free," and walks away, leaving the door to Evey's cell wide open. It is at this point that Evey (and we the audience) learn that her isolated imprisonment, her brutal torture, and the weeks of cruel interrogation were not carried out by the Norsefire government, but by V himself! It was V who captured Evey that night during the raid

on Gordon's house. While the Fingermen carried Gordon away to a government detention facility, Evey was brought back to a secluded corridor within the Shadow Gallery.

After considerable shock and anger, Evey regains her composure. V reminds her that she has just faced the most fearful situation possible, but managed to remain courageous and unwavering throughout. V says to Evey about her fear of death:

You found something true about yourself... Don't run from it, Evey. You've been running all your life... Listen to me, Evey. This may be the most important moment of your life. Commit to it...

They took your parents from you. They took your brother from you. They put you in a cell and took everything they could take, except your life. And you believed that was all there was, didn't you? The only thing you had left was your life... You found something else. In that cell you found something that mattered more than your life. Because when they threatened to kill you unless you gave them what they wanted, you told them you'd rather die. You faced your death, Evey. You were calm. You were still. Try to feel now what you felt then.

V takes Evey to the rooftop to get some fresh air, where the rain falls down on Evey's outstretched, Christ-like arms. Evey is re-born in the rooftop rain; she has transcended her fear of death; she is now more like V than anyone else in London. And, importantly, she is no longer vulnerable to the control of the Norsefire government. She has found a reservoir of courage to face external threats to her own life. She cannot be controlled, intimidated, or manipulated.

In the eyes of the corrupt Norsefire government, Evey is dangerous precisely because she is invulnerable to fear. She will be labeled a terrorist, just like V. But from the point of view of V's political revolution, she is empowered. She is now an agent of change. After a few weeks of recovery, Evey leaves the Shadow Gallery and walks among the citizens of London without any disguise. She is unnoticed. She is anonymous. She is unafraid. And she is empowered.

## Analysis of the Citizens

Approaching the day that V has pledged to blow up the Houses of Parliament, we witness the agitated and fearful High Chancellor stating, “I want everyone to remember why they need us.” The next few scenes depict all branches of government rallying to increase fear and control in the population, including more surveillance of citizens and increased propaganda. Despite these attempts to keep the citizens in a state of fear and obedience, the citizens of London take to the streets to witness V’s revolutionary activities. In the weeks leading up to the big event, V mailed out thousands of identical white Guy Fawkes masks and black robes, which the citizens wear. On the evening of 4 November, they emerge from their homes, from their local pubs, from their retirement centers, and from their jobs looking just like V. They march toward the Houses of Parliament and converge on an awaiting military security force.

The citizens are anonymous, but they are not violent. They, too, are fearless. They resist intimidation by the government and the show of force demonstrated by the military. The citizens continue to march up to, between, and around, the military personnel. They do not seek physical conflict, yet they seek symbolic conflict: they are no longer afraid of the government. Their fearlessness sends a message to the government that they, the people, are now in control, and that the government should be afraid of them. Of course, by the time that the citizens are assembling to witness the destruction of the Houses of Parliament, there is very little of the Norsefire regime left: V has arranged for the assassination of the High Chancellor, and then V kills the leading Norsefire party members. No one is left to provide any orders, and the military stands down.

The only remaining significant member of the Norsefire party is Inspector Finch, whose own loyalties have been utterly shaken ever since he discovered the massive corruption. It is Finch who discovers Evey in the abandoned subway, about to pull the lever which will send the

train full of explosives (and V's lifeless body) toward the Houses of Parliament. Finch tells Evey to stop, but does not do so in a very convincing manner. She refuses to stop, he lowers his weapon, and she pulls the break lever without any further resistance. Finch, too, seems to be in favor of political revolution.

When we hear the clock strike midnight, we see Finch and Evey standing side-by-side as the train speeds away to destroy the Houses of Parliament. They walk away together, emerging at a rooftop to witness the destruction of the Houses of Parliament. During the explosions and fireworks and loud music, the citizens remove their masks. They are no longer afraid and no longer anonymous, and as a result, a genuine political revolution seems to be possible.

Clearly, we see numerous examples of fear in the film *V for Vendetta*. Fear motivates people to obey and conform; fear motivates people to accept reductions in their freedoms; and fear of revolution motivates the Norsefire regime to exert more power and control over citizens. However, some citizens, such as V and Evey, live without fear, and this is precisely where Hobbes's theory breaks down. V is without fear of the government or its agents. In this respect, Hobbes's analysis fails. From the point of view of the government, the most terrifying aspect of V is that he is immune to fear. Because V is not susceptible to the same fear-based motivation, an asymmetrical relationship exists between V and the Norsefire regime: V is no longer motivated by fear, and the Norsefire regime is unable to control him. Rather, he carries out his acts of social rebellion against a regime that is scared of him.<sup>7</sup>

In his quest to establish universal principles that can apply to all humans, Hobbes omits the possibility that ideas can lead humans to sacrifice their own lives. The ideas of love, political freedom, individual authenticity, etc., are capable of leading human beings to commit selfless

acts of compassion and sacrifice. Such ideas and actions are the stuff political revolutions are made of. Simply put, Hobbes overlooks this possibility.

### Links to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

In Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, we see Big Brother and The INGSOC Party using fear as a ruling principle. Fear is the source of hopelessness and misinformation; it is fear that leads to a loss of freedom and individuality; and fear serves as the basis of social control. The only hope for revolution is the resistance organization led by Emmanuel Goldstein and known as The Brotherhood, and the Proles.

During Hate Rallies, Party members are indoctrinated to despise Goldstein and The Brotherhood, and they are intimidated into abandoning hope of uniting with the Proles. The Proles, meanwhile, are rather powerless in their own right; they are outsiders, and they, too, live in fear of The Party and Big Brother and they seek to avoid contact with anyone considered to be outsiders, as such people might be infiltrating the Prole district on behalf of Big Brother. Thus, it is fear that suppresses rebellion and squelches the possibility of genuine political revolution.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the main character, Winston Smith, is tortured for a long period of time. At first, he tells himself that he can survive by telling them what they want to hear. But eventually, the torture is too much and Winston betrays Julia ("Do it to Julia!"). And when he finally gives up Julia something profound changes about him. He wasn't just saying it, he really meant it. His love for Julia was abandoned in favor of saving his own life. This affirms Hobbes's view that fear of death is universal, and that we will do anything to preserve ourselves (including selling out our lovers, or honestly believing that two plus two equal five). Our desire for self-preservation overrides our commitment to love and our attempt to live an authentic, meaningful

life. In this way, Winston's betrayal is an affirmation of Hobbes's view that our primary psychological motivation is fear, especially in response to preserving one's own life.

Like Winston, Evey is subjected to physical abuse and psychological torture. During her interrogation, however, she reads the account of Valerie whose courage and love helps Evey to transcend the fear of death. She does not value her own life above all else. Contrast this with Winston: in the Ministry of Love, Winston is surrounded by numerous other prisoners, including Parsons (Winston's otherwise cheery, deeply self-deceived neighbor). Parsons reports that he seems to have committed various thoughtcrimes (perhaps in his sleep), and that he is extremely proud of his daughter for reporting him to The Party. As a role model, Parsons expresses the cowardly orientation The Party attempts to instill in Winston. From the point of view of Big Brother, Parsons is a success story. From the point of view of just about any other human being imaginable (especially those of us reading along), Parsons' life is worthless and meaningless. It is in this context that Winston embarks on the road to fear, hopelessness, and betrayal.

Evey and Winston emerge from their interrogation with radically different personalities. Evey begins as a fearful and innocent citizen, but emerges fearless, courageous, and empowered. Winston begins as a cowardly yet rebellious Party member who reads banned books and has an illegal love affair, but emerges fearful, hopeless, and broken. After his release, there is little hope displayed by Winston, as he sits listening to the propaganda emitted from the telescreen in the Chestnut Tree Café. There is nothing meaningful left of Winston. On the other hand, Evey is a dangerous revolutionary, no longer fearful of the State. Winston emerges as a pawn; he is nobody. Evey emerges as a player, an active agent of change in an upcoming political revolution.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston's betrayal of Julia is a perfect example of what Hobbes assumes about human nature: that we are primarily motivated by fear of our own death. However,

in *V for Vendetta*, the courage and selflessness displayed by V and Evey challenge what Hobbes takes to be the primary motivation for human beings: it seems that fear of one's own death can be transcended and that ideas can be more powerful and more valuable than anything else.

In another respect, however, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* contradicts Hobbes. The fear generated by Orwell's dystopian Big Brother government is so extensive that it rivals the fear present in the state of nature, thus challenging Hobbes's claim that even a corrupt government is better than no government at all. If only he had the anachronistic opportunity to read Orwell, Hobbes may have considered the possibility that at least some corrupt governments might be more fearful than the state of nature! In addition to this, life in the Prole District is portrayed as peaceful and desirable (recall Winston's love for the Prole woman singing outside the window hanging her laundry to dry). In this sense, the Proles live closest to what would be a state of nature, and yet such a life is depicted as being far more desirable than life under the oppressive and fear-inducing rule of Big Brother.

Yet, as Hobbes defines things, the state of nature is supposed to be the most fearful of all possible scenarios. Readers who find Orwell's dystopian vision to be more fearful than Hobbes's state of nature have either failed to understand the state of nature properly, or else they have discovered some bit of governmental brutality that Hobbes overlooked. Nevertheless, Orwell's presentation of such a corrupt, oppressive government challenges Hobbes's assumption that the state of nature is the worst scenario possible, and so *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, like *V for Vendetta*, represents a challenge to Hobbesian political orthodoxy.

## Conclusion: Popular Culture and Philosophy

By using Hobbes's assumptions about human nature and political theory, we gain a better understanding of dystopian narratives such as *V for Vendetta* and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. For example, we are able to make important connections between different organizing concepts (such as fear and political rebellion), we understand characters with greater depth and complexity (as with Evey and Winston), and we develop additional insights into the human condition and political theory (the relationship between freedom and political control). This supports the view that philosophical ideas provide us with a perspective that is rewarding and meaningful when encountering examples of popular culture.

At the same time, however, these popular dystopian narratives reveal what is deeply mistaken about various philosophical ideas. For example, they challenge Hobbes's assumptions that human motivation is based exclusively on a fear of death and that political revolution is never justified. *V for Vendetta* shows that ideas such as democracy, political freedom, love, and personal authenticity are capable of motivating action. And both *V for Vendetta* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* challenge Hobbes's idea that political rebellion is never justified: confronting vivid, terrifying visions of political corruption can get us to realize that there is more to life than merely being alive. Having a life worth living, especially a life that includes political freedom and personal authenticity, is more valuable than merely being alive. Such ideas are capable of motivating revolutionary activities, and transcending our own personal fear of death. And yet, fictional portrayals of heroic, self-less acts are just that: they are fictional, and we must treat them carefully, and remember what role fictional examples play.

While Hobbes has been challenged throughout this paper, we can turn to Hobbes to see a way to transcend his own failings. Recall that it is reason that prompts us escape the state of

nature, to seek peace, to accept the social contract, and to submit ourselves to the civil rule of The State. Perhaps it is reason, too, that prompts us to care about something more than merely being alive: it is reason that prompts us to seek forms of government that encourages individual freedom, protects civil rights, and celebrates cultural diversity. Consequently, it is reason that creates the conditions for political revolution, and it is careful reasoning that leads us to value the ideas capable of empowering citizens to rise up against tyrannical, totalitarian regimes. That ideas are powerful was V's message to both the Norsefire regime and to the citizens of London. It was his message to Evey. So, perhaps Hobbes helps us to see that it is reason that allows us to transcend fear of our own death, to lay down our own lives, and to act on philosophical ideas that lead to political revolution

In this respect, I hope that I have demonstrated that a reciprocal relationship exists between popular culture and philosophical discourse. Contrary to those who maintain an antagonistic relationship between popular culture and philosophy (see note 1), I have tried to show that a mutually beneficial relationship can emerge that enriches our understanding of both popular culture and philosophical discourse. Yet, if we begin with an assumption that popular culture is somehow inferior to high culture and intellectual discourse, then it is easy to see how such antagonism can arise. According to such an assumption, popular culture will always be getting in the way of genuine intellectual discourse. However, if we approach popular culture with respect and study it as we would any other text, we can avoid viewing the relationship in exclusively antagonistic ways. Instead, we can view popular culture and philosophical discourse as mutually beneficial activities.<sup>8</sup>

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> For example, see Adorno *The Culture Industry* (1991), Horkheimer and Adorno *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1992), and Marcuse *One Dimensional Man* (1991).

<sup>2</sup> See Arnold (2004) for a discussion regarding the positive, meaningful relationship between *The Simpsons* and intellectual discourse.

<sup>3</sup> All Hobbes citations are taken from A.P. Martinich (editor), *Leviathan*, Toronto: Broadview Press, 2002 [originally published 1651].

<sup>4</sup> Hobbes believed that the role of sovereign could be occupied by a single individual (i.e., a monarchy) or by a committee of rulers (i.e., a parliamentary system or oligarchy). I will use “The State” as the general term to indicate the source of political power.

<sup>5</sup> While Moore did not personally endorse the film (or the changes that the writers and director made), the final cut of the film owes its entire shape and feel to the original graphic novel (Goldstein 2006; Johnston 2005). In what follows, when I refer to *V for Vendetta* I will be referring to the film version. I will make it clear when I am discussing the graphic novel.

<sup>6</sup> Hobbes discusses democracy in *Leviathan* Chapter 19, paragraphs 1-2, and also Chapter 19, paragraphs 12-16.

<sup>7</sup> Thanks to David Williams for insight. See Williams (unpublished manuscript) for an account of how Hobbes fails to consider the possibility of suicide terrorists.

<sup>8</sup> I would like to thank David Arnold, Ian Conrich, and C.R. Unni for their valuable comments on a draft of this paper presented at the Oceanic Popular Culture Association Conference (May 2007). I would also like to thank the local Phil-SWAP group, especially David Williams, for an enriching discussion of popular culture and the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes.

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